

Why the trails are a better option

November 11, 2015, As submitted by Scott Thompson , Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

Yes the railroad did help build the entire country. It was a transition from rivers and canals and horse and buggies. The railroads of yesteryear are a proud part of American and Adirondack history, but we cannot afford to preserve everything.

It is mostly private ownership and public support and not a tourist railroad that have preserved the historic structures that remain on the corridor and will hopefully serve the public appetite for nostalgic musing. The Adirondack Scenic Railroad has been a great effort but should demonstrate the decline in interest (as did the Saratoga and North Creek Railway) that would surely follow expanded rail service. The number of trains and length of season have been in steady decline.

The economy of the North Country has forever changed. Large-scale mining and timbering practices that helped create our country attracted more industries such as paper, charcoal and coke, iron and the populations to work them. Devastation of the woodland resources was the fuel and fodder for growth, but as we turned that page, we closed the book on an era.

Article Photos



Snowmobiles to be sold are stacked outside Smith Marine in the town of Webb, one of four main dealers in the area.

(Photo provided — Brittany Grow)

After William Seward Webb with 4,000 men built the railroad in 1892, the Adirondack Division actually reached its peak in 1913 when it was sold to the New York Central. By 1949, population demographics and resource availability had left the railroad operating in the red at the whims of the Public Service Commission until after the Penn Central acquired the burden from the bankrupt New York Central. With the loss of the U.S. Mail contract, the bid to abandon passenger service was allowed in 1965. Freight followed in 1971. (Source: "Fairy Tale Railroad" by Henry Harter, 1991)

The '60s saw the rapid growth of snowmobiling as the most universal winter activity over much of the Adirondacks, and the rail bed, even with the occasional freight, became the north-south connection. The little machines dotted the yards, and the communities started to develop the amenities to take care of the new tourism. Old Forge, in the town of Webb, went from a coffee shop and a HoJos to many restaurants, taverns and hundreds of beds, with trail permit sales being second only to taxes for the town coffers. The snowmobile dealers represent an impressive investment in the continuing viability of the sport.

Anyone who thinks the popularity of snowmobiling is in decline or that snowmobile tourism lacks momentum need only price the machines and the support equipment, and area real estate, to realize the economic effect.

As bad as the tracks are and as short as the useable season is for the Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor, it remains far and away the preferred connection from Old Forge and the Tug Hill areas to the trails in Tupper Lake, Lake Clear and the rest of the Tri-Lakes region. Without rails and ties, a groomed trail would be available almost double the days currently used and the tourism for the connected regions would increase exponentially. The state Department of Transportation installed traffic counters and saw snowmobile numbers jump from tens to 465 sleds a day in Sabattis and Big Moose in 2014, when snowfall made coverage adequate for good grooming. The difference for a good trail would go from feet to inches of snow cover.

Snowmobiling tourists may create the most per-person spending, but the corridor is without snow the greater part of the year and without the rails and ties, there are many more options for its use. Cycling is now one of the most popular outdoor activities, and bicycles are configured in many fun ways: bikes, trikes, fat tired, built for two, recumbent, hand-cranked, side-by-side for two, four, even six pedalers built for extreme competitors, electric assisted and handicapped equipped.

Healthful, active pursuits may be the next "cure in the mountains." Health plans and insurance companies are beginning to offer incentives for joining groups and programs using trails. Real estate values increase tremendously when a recreational path is available.

Building and maintaining a trail really is not in any way comparable to rebuilding and maintaining the railroad. It does not take an engineer to know that infrastructure to support a few hundred tons of train must be much greater than that necessary when a groomer would otherwise be the largest piece of equipment.

Another issue is the "all or none" railroad conundrum, as exemplified when the train could not operate to Big Moose for a season because of one rail failure, and this past season's late start for the train. The trail would be immediately useable by the snowmobiles, and the corridor would be useable for many activities in all seasons at many levels as it is developed.

We have to hope the state will pursue its proposed change to the unit management plan and begin the trail from Tupper to Lake Placid, and delay further investment in the tourist railroad infrastructure at least until the first step is realized.

Scott Thompson owns, runs and lives at the Norridgewock Lodge in Beaver River, along the Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor, and is a board member of Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates.